

NORMALIZING OBSCENITIES

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A Catholic League staffer was recently having dinner with friends at a New York steakhouse when she witnessed a table of several mature women talking loudly, some of whom were throwing around the “f-word” with abandon.

It used to be that such language would be heard in pubs, but not in pricey restaurants, much less by women in their senior years. But times have changed. The dumbing down of language, just like the dumbing down of virtually every other standard of decency, has become the norm. President Trump, and Biden before him, have certainly made their contributions to this end.

We can blame the entertainment industry and the media for normalizing obscenities. Movies have long featured expletives, but now TV shows and the mainstream media are following suit.

Last Friday I was reading a news story in the *New York Times* on the anti-ICE protest in Minneapolis. It quoted the Minneapolis mayor, Jacob Frey, saying the government’s position was “bull – – -,” I have been reading this newspaper for decades, and I honestly don’t recall reading this word spelled out in a news article before. Then I read the next sentence. It quoted Frey telling ICE to “get the f-out” of Minneapolis”; the obscene word was printed in full.

Last night, I heard Fox News host Greg Gutfeld complaining how insincere the anti-ICE protesters are about the welfare of illegal aliens. He said, “they don’t give two s-s about these people.” He was not censored. The show airs at a time when children watch TV.

Today, in the *New York Times*, there is an op-ed by John McWhorter, a linguist who teaches at Columbia University. He

is celebrating the increased use in public of the “f-word.” He says, “I actually think it’s a positive development.” He opined, “The normalization of the word...is a sign of maturity in American English.” Ironically, he chose not to spell it, instead referring to it as the “F-word.” He concluded saying he was “happy” that we are “getting to the point where we can all speak the way we think and live.”

What about the “n-word”? Would McWhorter, who is black (I happen to admire his work on race), celebrate its invocation on TV and in newspapers? If not, why not? Why wouldn’t it be a sign of maturity?

A number of years ago on CNN I was objecting to the display of some obscene artistic display when the host smugly chided me for not respecting free speech, the way the cable channel does. I immediately challenged him, saying they would not allow me to say the “n-word” on TV, only I actually said the word.” I smiled, but he didn’t, when they – rightfully – censored me. “See,” I said.

We decided to find out how some of the big media have been handling this issue. We looked at AP (Associated Press), the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. We [found](#) that in more recent times, all three are more likely to spell out the “f-word” than the “n-word.” Nice to know what offends, and does not offend, liberal elites.

Why should this matter? Every survey in this century on the subject of civility and the moral order shows that Americans – across all demographics – are genuinely concerned about what has been happening. Things are going south. When people treat linguistic offenses like pedestrian commentary, they are letting their guard down. By itself such a phenomenon will not change our cultural landscape, when it is coupled with other attempts to normalize deviancy, it certainly does.

In the 1990s, Daniel Patrick Moynihan warned that “we have

been redefining deviancy so as to exempt much conduct previously stigmatized, and also quietly raising the 'normal' level in categories where behavior is not abnormal by any earlier standard." Agreeing with him in his *American Educator* article, "Defining Deviancy Down," was John Cole. As an example of what Moynihan noted, he said there were increased incidents of "profane and abusive language" targeted at teachers by their students.

Normalizing obscenities is not worth celebrating. It only increases the coarseness that has engulfed our society.